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*The Bearing of Church History on the  
Proposed Representative Church Council.*

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A PAPER READ BEFORE THE  
Oxford District English Church Union  
ON FEBRUARY 23, 1904,  
AND PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST.

BY

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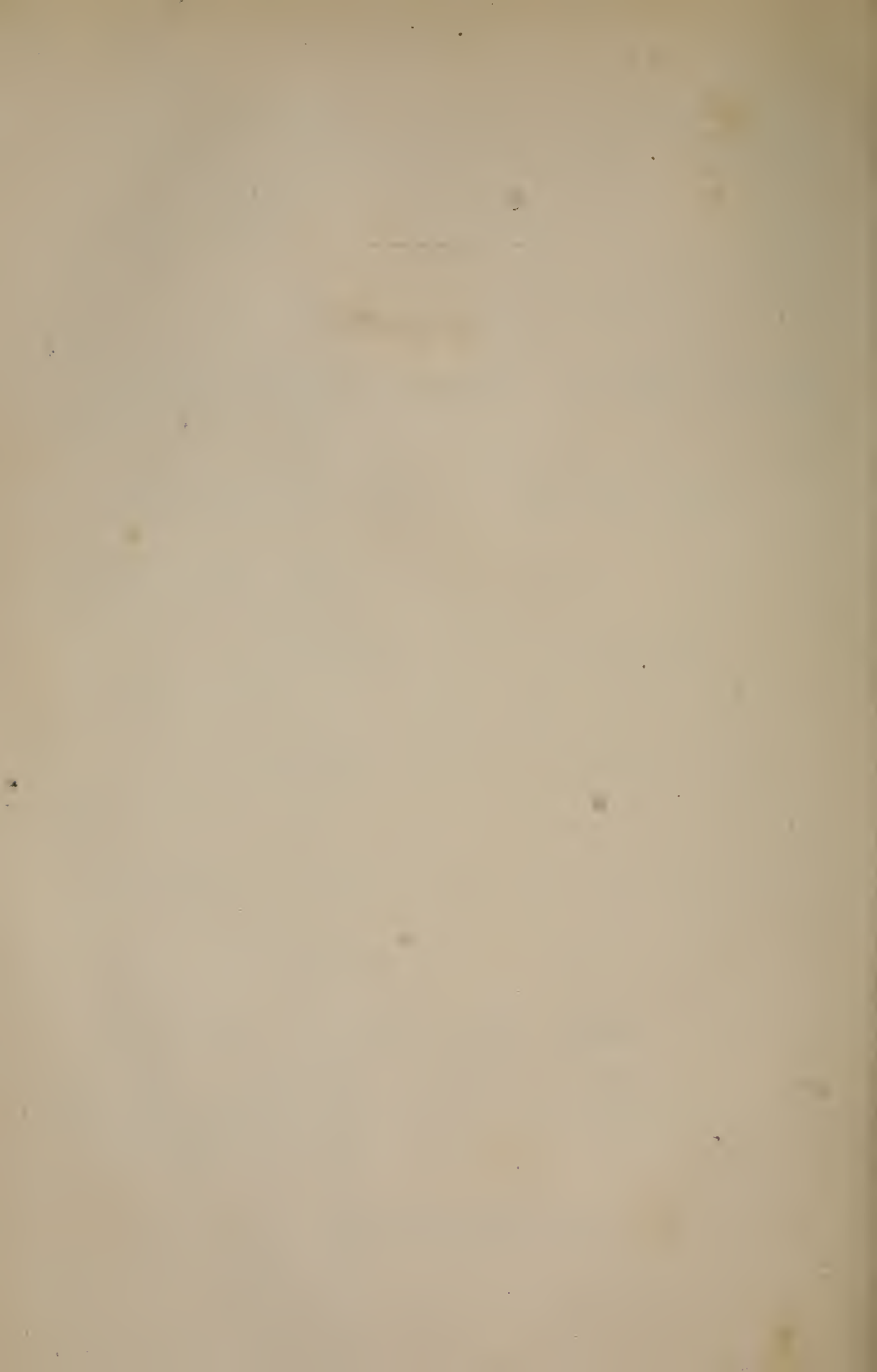
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James Parker and Co.  
27 BROAD-STREET, OXFORD;  
AND 31 BEDFORD-STREET, STRAND, LONDON.

1904.

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# The Bearing of Church History on the Proposed Representative Church Council.

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THE subject we have to consider is the bearing of Church History on the proposed Representative Church Council. It may be convenient in this paper first to state the form of council which has been suggested; secondly to give some account of the history of Church councils; and thirdly to consider whether history is in favour of the proposed scheme as it stands, or of the modification of it.

## I.

On July 9 and 10, 1903, a joint meeting was held of the members of the English Convocations and of the Houses of Laymen. At this meeting a series of resolutions were passed on the subject before us. The first two resolutions affirmed that it is desirable to form a "Representative Church Council consisting of clergy and laity of the provinces of Canterbury and York," to be at first on "a voluntary basis" without "legal constitution and authority." The third resolution was in favour of taking necessary steps "for the reform of the two Convocations, and for their sitting together from time to time as one body." The fourth resolution was to the effect that "with a view to providing the lay element in the proposed council, it is desirable that the Archbishops should continue to summon Houses of Laymen, pending any future legislation on the subject." According to the

fifth resolution the Council is to consist of three Houses, of which the first is to comprise the members of the Upper Houses of the Convocations of Canterbury and York, the second the clergy of the Lower Houses of the Convocations of Canterbury and York, and the third the members of the Houses of Laymen of the same two provinces; and it was further provided that "in order to constitute an act of the whole body" "acceptance by each of the three Houses, sitting together or separately," should be necessary, but that there should be no "interference with the powers and functions of each of the three Houses." The sixth resolution dealt with the highly important subject of the electors of the Lay House. It provided that "the initial franchise of lay electors" should "be exercised in each ecclesiastical parish or district by those persons of the male sex (possessing such householding, or other vestry qualification, in the parish or district as may be defined by the Committee to be hereafter appointed) who declare themselves in writing at the time of voting to be lay members of the Church of England, and of no other religious communion, and are not legally and actually excluded from communion, and by such other persons residing in the parish or district as are lay communicants of the Church of England, of the male sex, and of full age." The seventh resolution was to the effect that the representatives to be elected by the electors contemplated in the sixth resolution should be "communicants" "of the male sex, and of full age." An eighth resolution authorised the appointment of a Committee "to prepare a scheme in further detail to give effect to the foregoing resolutions, and to report to the Convocations and to the Houses of Laymen." In accordance with the last resolution the Archbishops of Canterbury and York appointed a Committee, consisting of the Bishop of Winchester, the Bishop of Ripon, the Bishop of Salisbury,



Bishop Barry, the Dean of Canterbury, the Archdeacon of Durham, the Dean of Arches, Sir Edward Russell, and Chancellor Smith; and this Committee drew up a scheme. This scheme assigned the name "The Representative Church Council" to the proposed body; provided for the Council being summoned by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and for some other details of procedure; suggested that there should be as soon as possible "one uniform scheme" throughout the two provinces for the election of the Houses of Laymen; and specified the "householding or other vestry qualification" left undefined by the Joint Meeting to be the occupancy of house or land in respect of which rates are paid either by the owner or the occupier.

During the last three weeks an extremely important step has been taken. At the instance of the Archbishop of Canterbury the Convocations of Canterbury and York and the Houses of Laymen have passed resolutions asking the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to summon, in July, 1904, a meeting of the Representative Church Council on the provisional constitution which has been described; and asking the Representative Church Council "at its first session to give further consideration to the question whether the initial franchise of lay electors should or should not be extended so as to include women."

The Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury, on the motion of Chancellor Worlledge, of Truro, has passed a resolution stating that the relation of the proposed Representative Church Council to Convocation needs fuller consideration; and a Committee of this House has been appointed to go into this question and report.

The Representative Church Council, then, as at present proposed, is to consist of three Houses: the first composed of the diocesan Archbishops and Bishops, the second com-

posed chiefly of priests, the third composed of laymen. The Lay House is to be elected by male lay ratepayers who are possible communicants, and by other male communicants of full age. The powers of the Council, and its relation to the Convocations, are undefined.

## II.

The next part of our subject is concerned with the history of the Councils of the Church.

The earliest Council of which we have knowledge is that held at Jerusalem and recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. At this Council the matters in dispute were considered by the Apostles and the presbyters; the discussions were carried on in the presence of the whole body of the faithful; the decisive voices were those of the Apostles; the presbyters joined with the Apostles in writing the formal letter declaring the decision; the faithful in general shared in taking steps to make the decisions known. The words of the writer of the Acts are, "They appointed that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the Apostles and presbyters about this question;" "The Apostles and the presbyters were gathered together to consider this matter;" "When there had been much questioning;" "All the multitude kept silence;" "Peter rose up and said;" "They hearkened unto Barnabas and Paul;" "James answered, saying;" "The Apostles and the presbyters, brethren, unto the brethren;" "The decrees . . . which had been ordained of the Apostles and presbyters;" "It seemed good to the Apostles and the presbyters, with the whole Church, to choose men out of their company, and send them to Antioch." (Acts xv. 2, 6, 7, 12, 13, 22, 23, xvi. 4.)

The Councils later than that at Jerusalem recorded in

Church History may be divided for our present purpose into two groups—first, diocesan Councils consisting of the clergy of the diocese, meeting under the presidency of the bishop; and, second, provincial or larger Councils. With the diocesan Councils we are not now concerned. The larger Councils must be discussed in some little detail.

The earliest Councils in the group we have now begun to consider are those held during the second century in Asia Minor in regard to Montanism, and in many places about the time of keeping Easter. The evidence as to the composition of these Councils is scanty. What there is indicates that they were composed of bishops, and of bishops alone<sup>1</sup>.

We come next to the Councils held in Africa in the middle of the third century. It is clear, that ordinarily at these Councils both presbyters and laity were present, and expressed their opinions. St. Cyprian states that at the beginning of his episcopate, he determined to do nothing in the administration of his diocese without the advice of the presbyters and deacons, and the assent of the people (*Ep.* xiv. 4). To some extent, at any rate, he seems to have carried out this maxim in matters touching a larger sphere. At the Councils held to consider the problem of the restoration to Communion of Christians who had lapsed in time of persecution, presbyters and deacons and laity were present (*Ep.* xvi. 4, xvii. 1, 3, xix. 2, xxx. 5, xxxi. 6, xxxiv. 4, xliii. 7, lv. 6, lix. 15, lxiv. 1), and expressed their opinion, sometimes in opposition to that of their bishop (*Ep.* xvii. 3, lix. 15). But, as in diocesan matters, though the bishop consulted the clergy and the laity, the decision was his own, so in the larger Councils, the bishops, while seeking

<sup>1</sup> See note I on page 18.

the opinions of others, alone were what in modern language are called constituent members, and alone had what in modern methods would be a vote. A good instance is afforded by the Council held at Carthage, on September 1, 256. This Council was summoned to discuss the question of the validity of Baptism administered by schismatics. It was attended by eighty-seven Bishops from pro-consular Asia, Numidia, and Mauretania, with presbyters and deacons; and "a very large part of the people were also present" (*Sententiæ Episcoporum*, præf.). The judicial pronouncements effecting the decision of the Council were the work of the bishops alone (*Sent. Episc.*). (See also *Ep.* xlv., xlv. 2, 4, lix. 13, lxiv. 1, lxx. 1, lxxii. 1, lxxiii. 1.)

A little later, in 264 or 265 and in 269, Councils were held at Antioch, to consider the heretical teaching and other offences of Paul of Samosata, the Bishop of Antioch. These Councils are referred to by Eusebius as consisting of bishops. In connexion with one of them, he speaks of presbyters and deacons being at Antioch, presumably to attend the Council; and at another, a presbyter named Malchion was present, and took a prominent part in the discussions. There is no reason to suppose that others than bishops were constituent members and had votes at these Councils; but the letter announcing the decision of the last of them was written in the name of "bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and the Churches of God." (Eusebius, *H.E.* vii. 27—30.)

The arguments of Origen, who was ordained presbyter about 230, with Beryllus, Bishop of Bostra in Arabia about 244, have sometimes been referred to as affording a parallel instance to the presence and action of Malchion at Antioch. It is probable, however, that these arguments were carried on in an informal conference apart from the Council, which

consisted of bishops. The words of Eusebius, in describing the incident, are : “ Beryllus, who was mentioned recently as Bishop of Bostra in Arabia, perverted the Rule of the Church, and attempted to introduce elements foreign to the faith, and dared to say that our Saviour and Lord did not exist in a distinct form of being before His sojourn among men, and that He does not possess personal Godhead but only the Godhead of the Father dwelling in Him. When very many bishops had held enquiries and discussions with the man on this matter, Origen was invited with the rest (*μεθ’ ἐτέρων παρακληθείς*), and went down at first for a conference to ascertain of what mind the man might be. But when he perceived what he said and ascertained that he was unorthodox, he persuaded him by argument, and convinced him by demonstration, and brought him back to the truth about the doctrine, and restored him to his former sound belief. There are still extant writings of Beryllus and of the Council which was held because of him, which contain the questions Origen put to him, and the discussions carried on in his diocese, as well as everything done at that time.” (*H. E.* vi. 33.) On the other hand Origen appears to have spoken actually in a Council held in Arabia a little later, though here again he was invited by the bishops, and does not seem to have been a member of the Council (Eusebius, *H. E.* vi. 37).

The Councils of the fourth century, like those of the third, consisted of bishops. Others, indeed, were present ; but, except where a presbyter or a deacon or one in minor orders attended as the representative of an absent bishop, none but the bishops appear to have been constituent members and to have possessed votes. At Elvira in 305 twenty-six (or thirty-six) presbyters were present, had seats, and signed the decrees in a group of signatures following the signatures of

the bishops ; deacons were present standing ; and the people in general were also present. But the decrees of the Council are described as the work of the bishops (Hardouin, *Concilia*, i. 249-250). At the Council of Arles in 314, presbyters and deacons and some in minor orders were present in attendance on bishops or as the representatives of absent bishops. One of the letters addressed by the Emperor Constantine to the bishops attending the Council, that to Chrestus, Bishop of Syracuse, has been preserved by Eusebius (*H. E.* x. 5.) In it Constantine directs Chrestus to take with him to the Council "two of the second throne (i.e. presbyters) whom thou thyself shalt decide to select." In the Acts of the Council in most cases a deacon or a reader or an exorcist signs immediately after his own bishop ; occasionally a presbyter does so ; two presbyters with two attendant deacons, the legates of Silvester the Bishop of Rome, sign among the bishops ; nine other presbyters sign among the bishops, apparently as the representatives of absent bishops ; two deacons sign similarly (Hardouin, *Concilia*, i. 266-268). There is no indication either in the letter of Constantine or in the Acts of the Council of the presence of laymen. The natural inference from all the evidence is that the only constituent members of the Council, that is those possessed of votes, were the bishops and those presbyters and deacons who were the representatives of absent bishops.

The Council of Nicaea was held in 325. It was summoned to consider the doctrine of the deity of our Lord in view of the rise of the Arian heresy, and the time of keeping Easter. It dealt also with a number of disciplinary matters. The Council itself consisted of bishops and the presbyters who were sent as representatives of the absent Bishop of Rome. Many presbyters, deacons, and acolytes were in attendance on the bishops ; one presbyter, Athana-

sius, destined in the providence of God to be in future years the great human instrument for the preservation of the truth of the deity of Christ, took a prominent part in discussions connected with the Council ; laymen skilled in dialectics engaged in conferences which preceded the formal opening of the Council ; the Emperor Constantine, though still unbaptized and therefore in no sense a representative of the Christian laity, was present at some of the proceedings as the Head of the State (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, iii. 6-14 ; Socrates, *H. E.* i. 8-14 : Sozomen, *H. E.* i. 15-25). But it is clear from the accounts given by all the authorities that the only constituent members of the Council were the bishops and the representatives of absent bishops. The conclusions which the evidence supplies were accurately summarized by Dr. Bright when he said " It was composed, properly speaking, of the prelates alone ; but they were fully qualified by their antecedents to represent their dioceses, and had provided themselves with clerical attendance such as might be at once a means of counsel or information and a check on inconsiderate action " (Bright, *The Age of the Fathers*, i. 78).

It is unnecessary to dwell in any detail on the Councils of the fourth century later than Nicæa, or on the Councils of the greater part of the fifth century. They do not present features different from those which have been described in the case of the earlier Councils. For almost the whole of the first five centuries it is true to say that bishops alone had the right to be present and to vote, or if unable to attend, to nominate a representative with voting power, at provincial and larger Councils ; that they often or usually voluntarily associated presbyters or deacons with them for purposes of consultation but without votes ; and that they sometimes or often took steps to ascertain the feelings of the Christian lay-people in regard to the matters discussed by the Council.

A series of Roman Councils held in the latter part of the fifth century and the early years of the sixth century are of great importance as bearing on the relation of certain presbyters and deacons to conciliar action. In some of these Councils the only members appear to have been bishops ; in others the presbyters and deacons who were the precursors of the Cardinalate had a place difficult to distinguish, if at all distinguishable, from the position of the bishops. (See especially the Council of 499 in Hardouin, *Concilia*, ii. 959—962.) In the case of one of them the presence of two distinguished laymen is mentioned in the list between the presbyters and deacons. (Council of 495 in Hardouin, *Concilia*, ii. 943A.)

This position of the presbyters in the Roman Councils of the late fifth and early sixth century is of some special interest and importance to English Church-people, because partly from it and partly from the position of the abbots in the Spanish Councils of the seventh century (see *e.g.* the Eighth Council of Toledo in 653 in Hardouin, *Concilia*, iii. 967) came that course of events which led to the English provincial synods of the thirteenth century including abbots and priors and representatives of the cathedral and collegiate chapters, and of the beneficed parochial clergy, and at a later date to the privileges of the Lower Houses of the Convocations of Canterbury and York. The power of these Lower Houses of Convocation, as they now exist, appears to be greater than any allowed to presbyters for very many centuries of the Church's life ; and to be justifiable only as it is recognised that it has been granted by the exercise of episcopal authority, and as it is assumed that the episcopate has always retained its right in the last resort to act alone.

It has already been noticed that the Emperor Constantine,



though unbaptized, was present at the Council of Nicæa as the Head of the State. As time went on, and the friendship between the Church and the State and their mutual influence on one another grew, the State came to have more to do with the Councils of the Church. The imperial power was represented, and the Emperor himself was in some cases present, at Councils of so great importance as those of Ephesus in 431, Chalcedon in 451, Constantinople of 680, and Nicæa of 787. As part of the development of the same tendency, the great men of the State other than kings came to be in close touch with ecclesiastical Councils. The two illustrious laymen present at the Roman Council of 495 have already been mentioned. Eight laymen of distinction were present at, and subscribed the decrees of, the Second Council of Orange in 529 (Hardouin, *Concilia*, ii. 1102). This presence and influence of eminent laymen might be illustrated somewhat copiously from the Spanish Councils of the sixth and seventh centuries, and the Anglo-Saxon Councils of the eighth and ninth. In regard to it, it is important to observe four points. Firstly, it was a departure from the methods of the earliest centuries of Christianity. Secondly, the laymen thus present were representatives of the State rather than of the Christian laity; and their position must be associated partly with an undue growth of the influence of the State in matters of the Church and partly with the confusion both in Spain and in England between civil and ecclesiastical legislation. Thirdly, there are indications of these laymen being present in some cases as learners rather than teachers (see the Epistle of Viventolus, Archbishop of Lyons, summoning the Council of Epaon in 517, printed in Hardouin, *Concilia*, ii. 1046), and for the opportunity of bringing abuses to the notice of the Councils (see the Fourth Council of Toledo of 633, canon 4, Hardouin, *Concilia*, iii. 580). Fourthly, side by

side with the Councils in which these laymen thus had part there were Councils of the bishops in which they had no share, instances of which are the Sixth and Seventh Councils of Toledo of 638 and 646 (Hardouin, *Concilia*, iii. 608—610, 623—625) in Spain, and the Councils of Hertford and Hatfield of 673 and 680 in England (Bede, *H. E.* iv. 5, 17, 18)<sup>2</sup>.

### III.

We have next to consider the bearing of what has been said on the proposed Representative Church Council in the Church of England. And here everything turns on what the status of this Council is to be, and what is to be its relation to the Convocations of Canterbury and York. If it is to be a conference of clergy and laity meeting at the will of the bishops, and subsidiary to Convocation, and in no sense an authoritative Council, the constitution of it appears to be a matter of expediency rather than of principle. But, if on the other hand it is to be a successor of the historic Councils of the Church, matters of very deep principle are necessarily involved in its constitution. And, so far as it is to be regarded as a Council, and not a conference, the proposed scheme cannot be considered satisfactory in the light of history. This scheme makes the lay representatives constituent members of the body, holding a position parallel to, and of the same kind as, that of the bishops and the clergy. The best precedents of the Church limit constituent membership in Councils to the bishops, aided in certain respects by the presbyters.

Yet it is clear that, if the Convocations of Canterbury

<sup>2</sup> See note 2 on page 19.

and York should remain as the Council or Synod of the Church of England, and if there should be no lay representation of any kind whatever, the position of the laity would be somewhat different from what it was at the time of, let us say, the African Councils of the third century, or the Council of Nicæa in the fourth.

The question then arises whether there is any means of the episcopal Synod, aided by the advice of the presbyters, being maintained, and a position of the laity similar to that in the third and fourth centuries being promoted. The existing Houses of Laymen suggest the possibility of a plan which will meet both needs. The Convocation of Canterbury as the provincial Synod of the southern province, the Convocation of York as the provincial Synod of the northern province, the two Convocations meeting together with any necessary modifications in the representation of the clergy in the Lower Houses as the national Synod of England, will supply the first requirement. The Houses of Laymen maintained as a distinct body might supply the second requirement, dealing freely, subject to the veto of the bishops, with matters of Church administration and finance; able to make suggestions on all matters to the Convocations; summoned by the bishops, when there is occasion, to be present at the meetings of the Convocations.

It would not be enough that, if the proposed Representative Church Council should be formed, there should be a statement that it was not "to interfere with the position of the Convocations as provincial Synods of the clergy." There are weighty words in which Dr. Bright, speaking of this very matter, said it is important "to scrutinize, very strictly, proposed 'safeguards,' which may turn out to be shams" (*Selected Letters of William Bright*, page 306). What is needed is that the Convocations be maintained as

one body, the Houses of Laymen as a distinct body, though with much power of administration and much possibility of suggestion.

The question who are to be the electors of the Houses of Laymen is of importance. That any who are not communicants should exercise such a franchise cannot be regarded as in accordance with the principles of the religion of Christ and the historical methods of the Church. Most of the practical objection to a communicant test could be met by a regulation that the voters should be those who had been communicants for a specified number of years past<sup>3</sup>.

It appears, further, that the electors ought to include women as well as men. A comparison of the first chapter of the Acts, where there is no reason to suppose that the women who "continued stedfastly in prayer" with the Apostles were excluded from the number of the brethren who chose the two candidates from whom the new Apostle was appointed (Acts i. 14, 15, 23-26), supports the opinion, in itself probable, that the "multitude" who were present at the Council of Jerusalem included women. The great body of the people who were present at African Councils in the third century do not appear to have been selected representatives, but rather a multitude allowed to come in. It is highly probable, therefore, that there would be among them women as well as men. Objections which might rightly be made to women being members of the Lay Houses would not apply to their being voters for such members.

The questions now under discussion are of the gravest importance. It is no light thing to alter the constitution even of two provinces of the Church of Christ. It is no light thing to part company with history, and to set up a new plan

<sup>3</sup> See note 3 on page 19.

designed rather to meet exigencies which can be met without it than to follow the best precedents of the Church. No good Christian who remembers what the word layman really means ought to wish to impede the rightful influence of the laity, or to withhold from them work for which they have special qualifications and capacities, or to hinder the due expression of their opinion on all ecclesiastical matters. But the government of the Church is a sacred trust which our divine Lord has committed to the bishops of the Church. That sacred trust might easily be endangered by well-meant interference with the historic methods which the Church of England has inherited. If it is to be preserved, the whole question of the proposed Representative Church Council and of its relation to Convocation requires an amount of careful consideration which it does not yet appear to have received. The whole question calls for caution and not haste. And, if there is anything in what I have said in this paper, there are better ways of meeting the real needs of the consultation of the laity and their administration of many matters than would be afforded by the Representative Church Council which has been proposed.

## NOTES.

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### Note 1: see page 7.

As to the Councils about Montanism, Eusebius (*H. E.* v. 16) only records meetings of "the faithful;" the *Libellus Synodicus*, a Greek document of the end of the ninth century, apparently compiled partly from ancient authentic sources, but also containing matter usually thought to be unauthentic, mentions three Councils, one held at Hierapolis by Apolinarius, Bishop of Hierapolis, and twenty-six other bishops; the second held by Sotas, Bishop of Achillae (*i.e.* Anchialus), and twelve other bishops; the third held in Gaul by "the confessors" (Hardouin, *Concilia*, v. 1493). A severe judgment was passed on this part of the *Libellus Synodicus* by Dr. Salmon, who wrote, "It is plain on examination that the compiler, wishing to enrich his collection with records of ancient councils, invented these imaginary councils, taking his main facts directly or indirectly from Eusebius and adding some blunders of his own. That meetings of bishops, however, to discuss this subject took place we have every reason to believe" (Smith and Wace's *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, iii. 938). Hefele regarded the passage about the first two of these Councils as "worthy of all confidence," but the third Council as "imaginary;" see his reasons in his *Councils*, i. 78, 83, 84 (E. T.)<sup>1</sup>.

As to the Councils held about the time of keeping Easter, Eusebius (*H. E.* v. 23, 24) describes these as consisting of

<sup>1</sup> It is fair to mention the suggestion that this document may be spurious in Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur*, i. 801.

bishops; the *Libellus Synodicus* mentions nine Councils eight of these are said to have consisted of bishops; of one of them it is only said that it was convoked by Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus (Hardouin, *Concilia*, v. 1493—1496). As to this last Council, we know from Eusebius (*H. E.* v. 24), and the letter of Polycrates preserved by him, that it consisted of bishops.

### **Note 2: see page 14.**

IT must be remembered that historically and in principle the position of the bishops is of constitutional authority, not of arbitrary power. In the early Church this was secured by (1) the bishops of the diocese being already informed as to the mind of the clergy and laity of their dioceses when they attended provincial Councils, and (2) an appeal being possible from a smaller episcopal Council to a larger body of bishops. In the present circumstances of the Church of England, an appeal might rightly be made from the bishops of the two English provinces to larger bodies of bishops and then to the largest body of bishops which could be brought together, practically, that is, the bishops of the Anglican Communion. It is further important to remember that any action of the bishops is also limited by Holy Scripture and the past tradition to which the Church is definitely committed.

### **Note 3: see page 16.**

ANOTHER plan which has been suggested is that the electors should be limited to confirmed persons who have not been presented to the bishop for failing to communicate. It will be seen that this may be done by either the churchwardens or the incumbent under canons 109—113.

PRINTED BY JAMES PARKER AND CO.  
CROWN YARD, OXFORD.



